

Developing a Community of Practice: The CHASE Model for Digital Humanities Researcher Training

Introduction

The provision of digital humanities training to graduate students who have no previous experience of the field is a challenging task. In the United Kingdom, such training is still unevenly distributed across universities, varying from dedicated Masters and Doctoral programmes to more informal seminars and research groups. For smaller or less research-intensive institutions, the establishment of a digital humanities programme usually begins with the recruitment of a single specialist lecturer (Cordell 2016), who may however struggle to cover the breadth of expertise required to provide suitably wide-spectrum teaching. This paper will address these challenges in relation to a specific training programme, including our pedagogical approach to addressing these challenges, and how we can develop DH syllabi that simultaneously address the individual needs of the learner alongside a broader understanding of DH as a field of practice.

The 11 Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council offer the possibility of pooling the expertise of several DH specialists to provide more extensive coverage. The Consortium of Humanities and Arts South-East England (CHASE) DTP, funded in 2014, comprises nine institutions: the universities of East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex; Goldsmiths, University of London; the Courtauld Institute; The Open University; Birkbeck College and the School of Oriental and African Studies. Since 2015, CHASE has employed its Cohort Development Fund to pioneer an innovative doctoral training programme, Arts and Humanities in the Digital Age (AHDA), which has to date trained over 80 students. The programme is built around a three-day winter school, a series of optional methods-based workshops, a two-day mid-project residential, and a final plenary session. This programme is supported by compulsory groupwork, where each group is tasked with producing a wireframe for a proposed digital humanities project.

Methodology

We faced two key challenges in developing the course: first, the DTP is comprised of a diverse range of institutions with broad remits across the arts and humanities; and second, we do not know the disciplinary backgrounds of our self-selecting cohort until they sign up. These students have already identified the relevance of the programme to their training needs, but they arrive with very different concepts of what the digital humanities actually are, and very different learning objectives. Some want to address a personal skills deficit; others want to develop existing skills to address a specific research goal; and others want to engage with DH as a field of study. This has necessitated an iterative approach to programme development that has cohered into a teaching philosophy focused on introducing digital humanities as a reflective methodological space.

The broad possibilities of DH can necessitate a self-deterministic element to skills development (Rhody et al., 2018), and this is reflected in our approach. It is important that our students understand the central methods that are considered core to DH (McCarty and Short, 2002), so that they may situate these methods in relation to their own disciplinary practices. Our approach has therefore been twofold: to establish a series of workshops on key methods in digital humanities¹; and to support this work with a residential school that introduces a degree of meta-discussion (Cordell 2016) alongside an explicit self-reflective component framed in terms of threshold concepts. This understanding is then developed through groupwork that allows students to situate their work within a broader sense of collaboration in digital humanities.

We have experienced relatively high variation in workshop attendance in the programme, which can be attributed in part to the difficulty of addressing this latter point. Our approach foregrounds individual skills development, while not necessarily making explicit that the methodological component of the programme reflects “communities of practice” of DH that draw together several disciplinary groups and ways of knowing (Siemens, 2016) into a so-called “methodological commons” (McCarty and Short, 2002). For new entrants to the field, the meta-discussions that shape our understanding of interdisciplinarity in DH are neither obvious, nor necessarily relevant insofar as interdisciplinarity can be understood to combine approaches or methods from more than one discipline (Klein, 1990). The extent to which the engagement of the digital humanities with various disciplines is truly interdisciplinary has been contested on the basis that it is not clear how the field contributes to a larger shared agenda with other fields (Liu, 2013). This has led others to propose alternative models: Svensson, for instance, introduces the notion of “trading zones” (2012) where different traditions are maintained while still carrying out intersectional work. Such approaches foreground the importance of methodology in defining the nature of these intersections.

Outcomes

AHDA has always introduced the domain of digital humanities through methodology as a reflective, iterative process. It does so because this is specifically a research-level programme. As such, developing confidence in the affordances and limitations of certain methods of analysis, and the quality of data itself, is recognisable to most research degree students. It echoes the conceptual underpinnings of their own, very specific, research projects, a key doctoral criterion (Berman and Smyth 2015). In the final presentations, participants are able to diagnose the technical and conceptual issues as they relate to their own research context, but also the methodological limits of their group project. By this process of reflection, students identify what could and could not be achieved, and in the course of cohort discussion, what approach might improve the reliability and validity of their project.

¹ The four iterations of the programme so far have trained students in the following methods: Text Encoding; Text Analysis; Information Visualisation; Digital Images; Web Authoring; Databases; Project Management.

The second outcome is that, through this reflective approach, students are developing a degree of *academic socialization*. That is, not only what constitutes an appropriate method or technique for the data, but how it relates to a discipline or across disciplines. For example, in presenting their research findings, our students are not simply evidencing the work they have undertaken, but are also modelling scholarly communication. This might involve explicitly articulating the method, demonstrating clarity and accuracy in terminology, and being able to defend their choice of project design within the timescale and resources at their disposal.

The key challenge in the second outcome - as Cordell (2016) notes in relation to undergraduate DH teaching - is that it is very difficult to develop those meta-discussions about digital humanities as a field. Programmes often fail to do this because the domain knowledge of the novice is insufficient, and frequently tied to their home discipline.

For our programme, it is possible that these two broad outcomes have limited potential for those intent on progressing beyond the methodological. For the majority of participants, practical application and a critical approach to analysis may be sufficient; in short, addressing a skills deficit. However, the kind of academic socialization noted above may not tackle the epistemological or hegemonic dimensions of digital humanities practices. These are better likened to Lea and Street's (1998) concept of *academic literacies*, which allow the student to better understand and critique the social nature of knowledge production in terms of what counts as known, and who or what makes those decisions. The challenge for programme design is embedding these literacies while still enabling students to achieve other key learning objectives.

Conclusion

The application of the pedagogical framework of AHDA has been continuously refined through student feedback. The four iterations of AHDA so far have privileged a self-directed style of learning, giving students the freedom to choose among a number of elective workshops. Student feedback has been positive, with those who complete the programme stating that it addressed their learning needs effectively, and that the cohort development aspect of the course helped them to take ownership of their learning within a supportive network of common interest. However, the teaching team has noted that the highest levels of engagement have been with those topics, such as Information Visualisation, that have the greatest cross-disciplinary applicability. This feedback, combined with the difficulty of providing specialised teaching for an always changeable student cohort, has led the teaching team to innovate the 2018/19 provision, which will therefore focus on leading the students through the lifecycle of a DH project. Through Open Source tools and platforms, students will learn how to clean, manage, store and analyse either their own data or those provided by the British Library; how to present their results and understand the nature of the DH community of practice; how to make informed decisions about the extent of their participation in DH, whether through deep engagement or in the form of "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave and Wenger 1991, Ridge 2014). We therefore will require mandatory attendance to all workshops in order for students to engage with each step of the project development process.

In this presentation we will introduce the development of the programme and report and evaluate this year's iteration in relation to the pedagogical framework described above. The unique contribution of this presentation will be to consider how theories of self-reflective learning can combine with an understanding of DH as a community of methods to inform the development of syllabi for postgraduate researchers.

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